DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 103 610 CE 003 202

AUTHOR Brown, Brewster W.
TITLE Methods of Needs Assessment Used in Continuing Education Program Development at Two Year Colleges in the State of New York.
PUB DATE 10 Sep 74
NOTE 27p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.95 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Community Colleges; Junior Colleges; *Measurement Techniques; *Needs; *State Schools; Surveys
IDENTIFIERS *Needs Assessment; New York State

ABSTRACT

A survey instrument was mailed to 44 directors of continuing education to determine the methods of needs assessment used for State-supported two-year colleges in New York and compare the range and scope of these methods in relationship to the size of the continuing education programs. All 17 responses served as the basis for the results for three survey questions; 15 responses (two indicated directions were not understood) were further subdivided into "large" and "small" program categories based on the number of credit courses offered. Seven respondents felt their needs assessment procedures were effective; three, somewhat effective; four, ineffective; and three did not respond. A regional approach to needs assessment was thought by four to be useful; six, perhaps; and seven, no. Of the seven methods of needs assessment, informal feedback was used the most by both program categories. Other methods used were: formal citizens advisory council, analysis of State/national needs and interests, written surveys, contact with helping people, review of local mass media, and campus faculty/administration continuing education advisory council. The random sample of area population was used very little relative to less scientific methods. (A seven-page bibliography and the survey instrument are appended.) (AG)

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METHODS OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT USED IN CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AT TWO YEAR COLLEGES IN THE STATE OF NEW YORK

Brewster W. Brown
September 10, 1974
Director of Community Services
and Continuing Education
Kansas Wesleyan
Salina, Kansas 67401

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DEFINITIONS

1. Traditional Post-Secondary Educational System

A model which uses the full-time-day, 18-22 youth as a base which is oriented toward attainment of credits and degrees, and which is primarily campus-based.

2. Traditional Students in Higher Education

The white male or female (to a lesser degree) who recently finished secondary school and is expected to finish a degree in the minimum number of semesters.

3. Non-Traditional Post-Secondary Educational System

The part-time Continuing Education adult model which is oriented toward attainment of both credits/degrees and non-credit offering with both campus-based and field-based sites.

4. Needs/Demands

Needs differ from demands as strategy differs from tactics. Needs are generalized desires which only become demands when they are articulated with enough specificity that the conditions are made clear under which a person with a need will actually attend a course/program.

5. Community College/2-year College

For the purposes of this paper all non-private two-year colleges in the State of New York, including agricultural and technical colleges.

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years there has been a developing interest at the state and local level in community needs assessment and regional needs assessment as a scientific method of program development. An example of this developing interest is the money the State of New York is now expending under Title I for regional Continuing Education Studies. This attempt to develop more relevant Continuing Education Data is commendable. However, it would seem, that before the state expends additional money to develop more relevant and comprehensive methods of needs assessment, one should stop and examine the methods by which directors of continuing education offices now determine the needs of the populations they serve. Do most of the program leaders in post-secondary continuing education at this time have the resources and time to develop and implement useful and accurate needs assessment instruments? Does the use of such methods in assessing community and individual needs drop with the size of continuing education programs? If so, it would appear that the state would be doing everyone a great service, especially the smaller offices of continuing education, by using state resources to develop valid needs assessment data. This would, in turn, assist local continuing education programs to develop in directions which would better serve the citizens of the community. However, the state would be providing a great

service only if the directors (or program developers) find the data valid and use it in program development. The problem then, is not simply one of turning out continuing education informational data by region or community, but also legitimizing this data to the people for whose use it is being developed.

Malcolm Knowles in his book The Modern Practice of Adult Education states:

> Studies of public-school adult-education programs quite readily group them on a spectrum ranging from those that limp along from year to year with apathetic participation at one end to those that are vibrant with activity every day of the week at the other end. From my observation of numerous programs of both types across the country, I believe I know one of the principal reasons for this difference. I predict that the directors of the first type of program build their program on the basis of what they think people ought to learn; they probably have no citizens' advisory council to clue them in as to what the people want; and they skip the second step in program planning--assessing needs and interests--entirely. On the other hand, the directors of the expensive programs probably have very active advisory councils which help them to make repeated surveys of the needs and interests of the individuals and institutions of their communities. (1970:79)

Knowles obviously feels that needs assessment is of paramount importance in developing an "expansive" and valuable program in continuing education. Brunner (1959:118) cites the need for research that takes as its starting point not the art of participation but the participant. Houle (1961:81) further challenges adult educators by stating that "the theory and practice of adult education would not progress very far until they were based on an understanding of how mature people approach the tasks and opportunities of adulthood."

Thus, three respected persons in the field of continuing education have stated a need for valid needs assessment in determination of program content. The problem, therefore, is whether continuing educators as a group actually do use random sampling survey data in program determination.

The purpose of this study was, therefore, to determine the various methods of needs assessment used by directors of continuing education for state supported two-year colleges and compare the range and scope of these methods in relationship to the size of the continuing education programs.

PROCEDURES

The hypotheses to be tested were: (1) of all methods of needs assessment or definition available, the method of formal community assessment by random sample survey instrument ranks very low in percentage of use, (2) as program size drops, so does the range and scope of methods employed in program development, and (3) many directors see no value in regional needs assessment.

To test the hypotheses, it was determined that the method which would return the greatest number and greatest variety of responses would be the direct mail survey questionnaire. A pretest of the questions and letter was given by the researcher to three continuing education directors in an attempt to develop an instrument which would list all popular methods of needs assessment at this level of post-secondary education.

The questionnaire was mailed out February 18, 1974 with the closing date for acceptance of returned data April 1, 1974. This date gave the directors approximately forty days in which to respond and return the completed survey. Of the forty-four survey instruments mailed, seventeen were returned before the deadline. Of those, two were found to be of little use (as will be described), leaving fifteen useable returns or a 34 percent response. It was not judged necessary to send a follow-up letter to the directors who did not respond, since an adequate cross-section of state two-year colleges were represented in the fifteen returned instruments. (A copy of the questionnaire and cover letter appear in the appendix.)

All seventeen returned surveys were used in analyzing the data for the first three questions. For the section of the instrument on "Methods of Needs Assessment," two of the returns were removed from further consideration when it became clear by the responses that they had not understood the directions for that section of the survey.

The number of credit courses was used in categorizing programs by size. Credit courses were used as a base because they tend to follow a more traditional pattern (meet for so many hours, so many weeks) and therefore remain better indicators of size within institutions. The number of credit courses which was arbitrarily chosen to represent a larger program was twenty-five or more while twenty-four or less was used to represent the smaller programs. Using these criteria to determine size, eleven of the responses were placed in the "large" category while four were placed into the "small" category.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In analyzing responses, a break-down in the number of credit and non-credit courses offered by those programs represented in the data may be of assistance. The range in numbers of credit courses went from 0-700 credit courses with a distribution as follows:

Table 1

NUMBER OF CREDIT COURSES

0-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	201 Plus
6	0	3	1	7

The range of non-credit courses was from 0-400 non-credit courses with a break-down as follows:

Table 2

NUMBER OF NON-CREDIT COURSES

0-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	201 Plus
9	4	2	0	2

It is clear from this data that a good cross-section as to size was represented in the returns.

The second survey question was: Do you find your present assessment procedures effective in determining individual needs and interests? While the results would be far

from impartial, they should at least give an idea of how the directors perceived the effectiveness of their assessment procedures. A break-down on responses to this question is as follows:

Table 3

EFFECTIVENESS OF PRESENT NEEDS ASSESSMENT EVALUATION

EFFECTIVE	NOT EFFECTIVE	SOME WAYS EFFECTIVE	NO ANSWER
7	4	3	3

Examination of this data suggests that half of the directors responding are satisfied with their present methods of needs assessment. One must note, however, that such self-evaluation could be less than impartial when one considers the fact that the responders did not know how the data would be used and may have been hesitant to respond in a negative manner.

The third question asked on the survey was: Would a regional approach to needs assessment be of assistance to you in your program? The responses to this question were as follows:

Table 4

NEED FOR REGIONAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT

YES A NEED	NO NEED	MAYBE A NEED	NO ANSWER
4	7	6	0

It appears that the sentiment behind the responses to this question may be hardest to overcome in developing a system of use for the data which a regional needs assessment study will produce. It is one thing to produce data which is valid and useful both to the local directors and to the region or state, but quite another to be producing data which flows only toward the state level of planning. For data to gain acceptance among those who will ultimately be asked to use it in program development, the regions and the state must gain local support for the regional method of needs assessment. This local support is not currently present as evidenced by the response to the question on Regional Needs Assessment (Table 4).

In determining the general areas of formal and informal needs assessment at the Community College, seven separate areas were identified. They are as follows:

1. Formal Citizens Advisory Council.
2. Analysis of State/National need and interests.
3. General Written Surveys.
4. Contact with helping people (Librarian, Social Workers, Vista Workers).
5. Informal feedback from other individuals or groups in the community.
6. Review of Local Mass Media.
7. Campus Faculty/Administration C.E. Advisory Council.

These general methods were proven to be comprehensive as evidenced by the response to an 8th category on the survey which was listed as "Other" (Table 5 and Table 6). The total

response in this area totalled only about one per cent of all the methods used, which would indicate that the other seven methods covered the valid types of needs assessment used by the directors responding.

Table 5

METHODS (AND ESTIMATED PER CENT OF USE) OF ASSESSING NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF INDIVIDUALS AND THE COMMUNITY TO HELP FACILITATE PROGRAM PLANNING IN CONTINUING EDUCATION AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES WITHIN NEW YORK STATE (25 OR MORE CREDIT COURSES OFFERED) 11 IN GROUP

A Percent you use for each method in determination of final program	B Methods (with sub-areas)
13.64% Range 0%-40% N = 9	1) Formal Citizens Advisory Council 69.00% Formal individual and Community feedback 16.50% Formal surveys of individual/Community needs 14.50% Other
10.45% Range = 0%-20% N = 10	2) Analysis of state/ national patterns of needs and interests 16.00% National Mass Media 31.50% Professional Publications 41.50% Professional Conferences and workshops 11.00% otner
10.45% Range 0%-20% N = 8	3) General Written surveys developed by College 2.50% Offered at Registration 12.00% Random Sample of Area Population 68.00% Offered in C.E. classes 14.00% Other

Table 5 (Continued)

15.00%	Range 0%-30% N = 10	4) Contact with "Helping People" within the Community (Librarians, Social Workers, VISTA Workers, etc. 33.50% Formal 56.50% Informal
27.73%	Range 20%-50% N = 11	5) Informal feedback from other individuals, civic groups and industry in the community 31.40% Individuals 16.80% Civic Groups 23.20% Industry 27.70% Institutions (Schools, Hospitals, B.O.C.E.S.)
9.55%	Range 0%-30% N = 10	6) Review of local Mass Media
10.91%	Range 0%-25% N = 9	7) Campus Faculty/ Administration C.E. Advisory Council
1.36%	Range 0%-10% N = 2	8) Others not listed above _____

The information contained in Table 5 represents the responses received from the community colleges which offered 25 or more credit courses through continuing education. The range is the range of individual method use per method. The N is the number of directors using the individual methods and should be compared to 11 which is the number of programs in the larger size range.

Table 6

METHODS (AND ESTIMATED PER CENT OF USE) OF ASSESSING NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF INDIVIDUALS AND THE COMMUNITY TO HELP FACILITATE PROGRAM PLANNING IN CONTINUING EDUCATION AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES WITHIN NEW YORK STATE (24 OR LESS CREDIT COURSES OFFERED) 4 IN GROUP

A Percent you use for each method in determination of final program	B Methods (with sub-areas)
0.00% Range = 0%-0% N = 0	1) Formal Citizens Advisory Council 0% Formal individual and community feedback 0% Formal surveys of Individual/Community needs 0% Other
8.75% Range = 0%-15% N = 2	2) Analysis of state/ national patterns of needs and interests 46.50% National Mass Media 16.50% Professional Publications 36.5% Professional conferences and workshops 0.00% Other
11.25% Range = 0%-20% N = 3	3) General written surveys developed by College 0.00% offered at registration 40.00% Random Sample of area Population 60.00% Offered in C. E. classes 0.00% Other
11.25% Range = 5%-20% N = 4	4) Contact with "Helping People" within the Community (Librarians, Social Workers, VISTA Workers, etc.) 7.50% Formal 92.50% Informal

Table 6 (Continued)

38.75%	Range = 20%-90% N = 4	5) Informal feedback from other individuals, civic groups and industry in the community 45.00% Individuals 20.00% Civic Groups 17.00% Industry 17.00% Institutions (Schools, Hospitals, B.O.C.E.S.)
9.69%	Range = 0%-20% N = 2	6) Review of local Mass Media
22.50%	Range = 0%-60% N = 2	7) Campus Faculty/ Administration C.E. Advisory Council
0.00%	Range = 0%-0% N = 0	8) Others not listed above _____

The information contained in Table 6 represents the responses received from community colleges which offered 24 or fewer credit courses through continuing education. The range is the range of individual method use per method. The N is the number of directors using the individual methods and should be compared to four which is the number of programs in the smaller size range.

In reviewing the data, one can see patterns which show a general lack of use of survey (individual or community) data in determining program content. In the case of the larger programs (Table 5), any form of survey of needs within the community is only used 15.36 per cent of the time in determining

the final program. This can be reduced even further by breaking the methods down into sub-areas. Then (Table 5-Number 3) only 12 per cent of the General Written Surveys used are of a random sample of area population.

When looking at the total program, then, we see random sample surveys of the area population needs used as a method less than two per cent of the time. In the smaller programs, the percentage of random sample surveys comes out to but four per cent. These percentages bring home the message that as a method of program determination, the random sample of area population is used very little in relation to less scientific methods (i.e., informal feedback 27.73 per cent for the large group, 38.75 per cent for the small group).

In reviewing the results of the survey, it is evident that random sample survey ranks very low in use for program development. With this general lack of use, it would seem that along with any new system of needs assessment, a valid attempt should be made to legitimize the data in the eyes of the persons who eventually should use the data. If this is not done, a whole program of regional needs assessment (or any for that matter) will do nothing more than add to the paper shortage. With this legitimization should come a higher percentage of use of the data which, in turn, would, as Houle suggested, allow the practice of adult education to progress.

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*The Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults no longer exists, but the literature it generated is still available through the Library of Continuing Education at Syracuse University.

STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE AT BROCKPORT / state university of new york
brockport, new york 14420

Faculty of Education
Office of the Dean

APPENDIX 1

February 18, 1974

Dear Director:

I am a teaching assistant in Education Administration (Community College Emphasis) at State University College Brockport.

I am researching the various methods of assessing the needs and interests of individuals and of the community, which in turn facilitate better program planning in Continuing Education. My study will include all departments of Continuing Education within the State Community College system. Your completion of the enclosed short survey would greatly assist me in this endeavor. All information I receive from individual institutions will be used in general data on all Community Colleges in the State with no identification or comparison of the individual institutions possible.

If you have any examples of instruments for assessing needs and interests within your community or any further information which you feel would be of assistance to me, please feel free to return it when you return the survey.

Cordially,

Brewster W. Brown
Teaching Assistant
253 Hartwell
S.U.C. Brockport
Brockport, New York 14420

BWB:dg
Enc.

1. What the approximate size and budget in Continuing Education is for this year.

_____# of Credit Courses _____# of Non Credit Courses

_____ Budget _____ Budget

2. Do you find your present assessment procedures effective in determining individual needs and interests? _____. If answer is no, what changes could make assessment more effective? (answer on back.)

3. Would a regional approach to needs assessment be of assistance to you in your program? _____

METHODS (AND ESTIMATED PERCENT OF USE) OF ASSESSING NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF INDIVIDUALS AND THE COMMUNITY TO HELP FACILITATE PROGRAM PLANNING IN CONTINUING EDUCATION AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES WITHIN NEW YORK STATE

A Percent you use for each method in determination of your final program.	B Methods (with sub areas)
_____%	1) Formal Citizens Advisory Council _____% Formal individual and community feedback _____% Formal surveys of Individual/Community needs _____% Other
_____%	2) Analysis of state/national patterns of needs and interests _____% National Mass Media _____% Professional Publications _____% Professional conferences & workshops _____% Other
_____%	3) General written surveys developed by College _____% Offered at Registration _____% Random Sample of Area Population _____% Offered in C.E. classes _____% Other
_____%	4) Contact with "Helping People" within the Community (Librarians, Social Workers, VISTA Workers, etc.) _____% Formal _____% Informal
_____%	5) Informal feedback from other individuals, civic groups and industry in the community. _____% Individuals _____% Civic Groups _____% Industry _____% Institutions (Schools, Hospitals, B.O.C.E.S.)
_____%	6) Review of local Mass Media
_____%	7) Campus Faculty/Administration C.E. Advisory Council

A Percent you use for each method in determination of your final program.	B Methods (with sub areas)
____%	1) Formal Citizens Advisory Council ____% Formal individual and community feedback ____% Formal surveys of Individual/Community needs ____% Other
____%	2) Analysis of state/national patterns of needs and interests ____% National Mass Media ____% Professional Publications ____% Professional conferences & workshops ____% Other
____%	3) General written surveys developed by College ____% Offered at Registration ____% Random Sample of Area Population ____% Offered in C.E. classes ____% Other
____%	4) Contact with "Helping People" within the Community (Librarians, Social Workers, VISTA Workers, etc.) ____% Formal ____% Informal
____%	5) Informal feedback from other individuals, civic groups and industry in the community. ____% Individuals ____% Civic Groups ____% Industry ____% Institutions (Schools, Hospitals, B.O.C.E.S.)
____%	6) Review of local Mass Media
____%	7) Campus Faculty/Administration C.E. Advisory Council
____%	8) Others not listed above_____
____% TOTAL	

NOTE: Please attempt to have percentages in Column A total 100%. Also for individual methods, it would be of help if the sub areas of the method totaled 100%.